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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SUVA 000211

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SUBJECT: FIJI'S GREAT COUNCIL OF CHIEFS REJECT VICE
PRESIDENTIAL NOMINEE

Classified By: Amb. Dinger. Sec. 1.4 (B,D).

Summary

1. (SBU) In a stunning rebuke to the interim government, Fiji's Great Council of Chiefs rejected President Iloilo's nominee for Vice President April 11. Commodore Bainimarama responded angrily, saying he was "totally bewildered" by the unprecedented decision. He claimed that members of the ousted government were using the GCC for their own political purposes. Bainimarama said his government "would not stand idly by." He announced an immediate cessation of all GCC meetings, a coming review of GCC membership and procedures, and investigations into the financial dealings of some GCC members. End summary.

GCC Rejects VP Nominee Nailatikau

2. (SBU) Fiji's Great Council of Chiefs rejected President Iloilo's nominee for Vice President, Ratu Epeli Nailatikau, during the Council's meeting April 11. Nailatikau, former head of the RFMF, Speaker of the Parliament, and High Commissioner to the UK, is currently the interim Minister of Foreign Affairs. Only one of Fiji's three confederations, Tovata (home of the Mara family), approved the nomination. The other two confederations, Kubuna (Nailatikau's confederacy) and Burebasaga (President Iloilo's confederacy) rejected the nomination. This is the first time a GCC has ever rejected a VP nomination put forward by the President, although the nomination of VP Madraiwiwi in 2001 had difficulties before it was finally approved. The Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Fiji Affairs, Ratu Meli

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Bainimarama, said President Iloilo had accepted the GCC decision. The GCC must reconvene at a future date, he said, at which time Iloilo will submit another nomination.

3. (SBU) Contacts tell us that Ro Tememu Kepa of the Burebasaga confederacy, former Minister of Education in the Qarase government, led the opposition to Nailatikau. She was given the floor early in the day's discussions and initiated a conversation that led to province by province discussions on whether the GCC should accept the President's nomination. According to press reports, Ro Tememu insisted that Nailatikau represents an illegal regime and therefore should not be appointed Vice President. Ro Tememu also noted concern about statements made against the GCC by Commodore Bainimarama and others after the military took power last December.

Ganilau, Bainimarama Surprised and Angry

¶4. (U) Speaking to reporters after the GCC announcement, interim Minister for Fijian Affairs Ganilau was clearly surprised and upset by the decision. The role of the GCC, he said, is to endorse the President's decision. It is very sad to see the chiefs fail to fulfill their proper role. In an interview April 12, Ganilau said it is clear that members of the GCC do not recognize the interim government and that some chiefs are pursuing a political agenda. Ganilau said he and Commodore Bainimarama would not make scheduled appearances before the GCC April 12 since it would now be pointless to brief the chiefs on the progress made by the interim government.

¶5. (U) In a press statement issued by the interim PM's office April 12, Bainimarama blasted the GCC decision. "I am totally bewildered as to why the Chiefs rejected the nomination by His Excellency of Ratu Epeli as Vice President," he said. "Reportedly the rejection is based on the premise that Ratu Epeli as Interim Foreign Minister is part of an illegal regime and thus should not be endorsed for that position. It is premature and irrational to bring in reasoning such as this. It is the Judicial and Court process which will determine the legality or otherwise of the Interim Government." In his statement, Bainimarama said that Nailatikau joined the interim regime to "help move the country forward." He and other interim government members "are being penalized and crucified for having responded to a genuine call of national service." Bainimarama concluded the statement by saying that "instead of pulling together in this hour of need (the chiefs) have drifted apart primarily based on prejudiced advice and personal agendas."

Bainimarama - "We will not stand idly by"

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¶6. (U) In remarks to media late April 12, Bainimarama said "my government will not stand idly by" and let those with a political agenda "bring disrepute to this august institution (the GCC)." He said it was clear that some members of the ousted government were using the GCC to further their own aims. Bainimarama directed the Ministry of Fijian Affairs to undertake an urgent review of GCC membership and procedures to ensure a "clean up" of that institution. In the meantime the GCC would not be allowed to meet. He also said there would be a review of newly appointed members of the board of the Fijian Trust Fund to look for corruption. Ro Tememu Kepa, among others, is one of the new members. Bainimarama said that, while there is no Vice President at present, President Iloilo will be able to appoint an acting VP "by proclamation" for the period when the President is in Australia for medical treatment.

Comment

¶7. (C) The Chair of the GCC had been sounding conciliatory in recent months. Rumor has it that the military had threatened the Chair with corruption charges. Quite clearly from the meeting this week, most GCC members remain very unenthusiastic about the coup and the interim government. Nailatikau's rejection is in part because of that. In part it presumably reflects internal chiefly disputes as well. Bainimarama's expressed intention to "clean up" the GCC will be taken as an insult by traditionalist Fijians. It will stoke the still-live discontent in the villages. We hear there is unhappiness in military ranks, in part because of Bainimarama's past anti-GCC remarks. If so, that will be further fueled. All that said, to this point ethnic-Fijian discontent has not translated into action. Even savvy Fijians are unable to predict what will happen next, but all agree the GCC action this week was historic.
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